There's a moment from my second year of training that lingers in my mind. I was about to do a muscle biopsy for a patient, referred by a local specialist physician. Wanting to ensure the right amount of muscle was taken, I reached for the phone and rang the referring doctor. A firm and businesslike woman answered. I introduced myself as the neurosurgery registrar, and suddenly, her tone changed. "How wonderful!" she demurred "Are there many of you?" she asked, in a quiet, wistful voice. It emerged that when she was a medical student, there were hardly any women in medicine at all, and the idea of a woman going into surgery was inconceivable. Once I determined just how big a piece of vastus lateralis she wanted sent to the pathologists, she thanked me, from the bottom of her heart, for pursuing my dream. I was in tears as I hung up the phone, and I suspect she was too.

Years later in a theatre locker room I ran into an esteemed senior surgeon from another specialty. We were both rushing to other places, other patients, but even in the brief moment we talked about a difficult operative decision, I felt like I gained something. Beyond the wonderment that she remembered my name, there was the feeling that I had received a little of her wisdom. I walked out of the theatre complex with a spring in my step. When I count the inspiring moments with senior surgeons in women's locker rooms, desperately few such encounters come to mind. It wasn't until I excitedly told a male colleague about my uplifting conversation that I realised how much more frequently for male Trainees.

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There's a lot to be said for noting these moments of giving and receiving inspiration. It's easy to forget that what we do as surgeons is not only helpful to our patients and their families, but valuable to those who have come before us, as well as those who follow in our footsteps. And it's particularly important that we bring our whole selves to the work. It was so crucial to that specialist physician that I was a woman – in surgery. Important in ways I couldn't have imagined. Similarly, it is important and inspiring to me that an increasing number of women aspiring to become surgeons in New Zealand and Australia identify as Māori, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. And whether what we bring what John Legend calls "the wisdom of the elders" or "young people's energy" we have a role to play in encouraging others to be their best and truest selves.

Dr Ruth Mitchell
Immediate Past Chair, RACSTA